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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 20th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. PETRESKI (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 96: ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (continued) (A/50/25, A/50/171, A/50/182, E/1995/66 and Corr.1, A/50/254-S/1995/501, A/50/366, A/50/371, A/50/400, A/50/407, A/50/425-S/1995/787, A/50/475, A/50/518; A/C.2/50/2)

(a) IMPLEMENTATION OF DECISIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT (continued) (A/50/3, A/50/74 and Add.1, A/50/218, A/50/453, A/50/515)

(b) DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT (continued) (A/50/227, E/1995/95, A/50/347, A/50/516)

1. Mr. KJELLEN (Sweden), speaking as the Chairman of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the Elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification, said that the progress reports on the work of the Committee were important because they provided an opportunity to set the Convention in the broader political framework of the General Assembly. The follow-up to the Rio Conference, of which the Convention was a key element, demonstrated the capacity of the United Nations system to address global problems of a new kind.

2. The support given to the Convention by the international community had been further confirmed during the past year: the Convention had been signed by 115 States, and many had begun the ratification process. It should enter into force in 1996, and the first session of the Conference of Parties would be held in 1997.

3. Thus, the Committee should conduct its work with the greatest possible efficiency. Its seventh session had been productive, especially on various technical issues. The eighth session would be devoted to scientific and technical cooperation and the question of a global mechanism; the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and UNDP had expressed interest in housing the mechanism.

4. It had also been possible to take stock of the progress in urgent action for Africa and interim actions in other regions, the results of which had been rather encouraging. Specific actions had actually been taken using the principles and methods of the Convention, particularly in Africa. On the local level, they included creation of partnerships, the involvement of science and recognition of the close relationship between land and water management and the role of socio-economic factors.

5. The global character of the Convention and the special attention to be given to Africa were mutually supportive; Africa remained a cornerstone of the Convention.

6. While there was some cause for confidence, there were also concerns. In order to be fully effective the Convention needed to be widely disseminated, and the United Nations system, Governments and non-governmental organizations had

been unstinting in their efforts in that area. Voluntary funds were also a matter of concern, and he had had to launch an appeal to donor Governments. It was essential that those who would take responsibility for implementing the Convention in the field should have the opportunity to participate in meetings, particularly the next two Committee sessions.

7. The Convention was a modern instrument reflecting new concepts of the importance of development cooperation in a changing world, and an essential part of the post-Rio process.

8. Mr. BIAOU (Benin) said that, in the context of the implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Benin had taken various initiatives at the national level. It had established such bodies as the Beninese Centre for Sustainable Development, created with assistance from the Netherlands, and the Benin Environmental Agency. It had formulated a programme for the implementation of Agenda 21, also with assistance from the Netherlands, instituted an annual campaign to raise environmental awareness, and launched a weekly television programme. On the international level, Benin supported the holding of a special session of the General Assembly before the 1997 regular session.

9. With regard to the fight against desertification and drought, Benin had begun the ratification process for the Convention. It had also established a technical committee on the implementation of the Convention and organized national information days and various demonstrations on the occasion of the World Day to Combat Desertification.

10. Combating desertification and the effects of drought was essential to the establishment of sustainable development, which should be the main objective of the United Nations for the next 50 years. It was of primary importance that measures should be taken to assist Africa without awaiting the entry into force of the Convention.

11. The decline in voluntary contributions to the Trust Fund and the Voluntary Fund continued to pose problems, despite the generosity of certain countries. The developing countries affected by drought and desertification, particularly the least developed countries and the African countries, should be assisted so that they could send two representatives to the sessions of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, which had two working groups. Furthermore, in terms of the size of its secretariat and of the voluntary contributions provided, the Convention should be on an equal footing with the Conventions on Biological Diversity and Climate Change.

12. In view of its widening responsibilities and the difficulty it was having providing funding for the representatives of the Sudano-Sahelian countries, the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO), should receive increased support.

13. Mr. Hayong MOON (Republic of Korea) noted that some progress had been made in the implementation of Agenda 21. The Commission on Sustainable Development had been effective in fulfilling its mandate and had proven its value as an intergovernmental forum for exchanging national experiences in promoting sustainable development. In that regard, the Republic of Korea had hosted two

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important workshops, one on changing consumption patterns and the other on access to and dissemination of environmentally sound technology.

14. However, much remained to be done. Issues of finance and transfer of environmentally sound technologies were of particular concern.

15. The Republic of Korea supported the measures taken by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to strengthen its activities, and also welcomed the initiative to decentralize the regional offices and to enhance its regional coordination role.

16. His Government intended to ratify the Convention to Combat Desertification, and expressed the hope that it would soon enter into force.

17. Mr. PAWAR (India) said that the partnership for sustainable development had been based on the premise that environmental protection could not be divorced from poverty eradication and efforts to promote economic growth in developing countries.

18. It had been agreed that the industrialized world would immediately take corrective and preventive action. Unfortunately, no significant steps had been taken by the developed countries to change their consumption and production patterns. In that regard, his delegation welcomed Norway's initiative to facilitate the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development in the area of consumption patterns. However, as far as the Commission itself and policies of the industrialized countries were concerned, there was hardly any progress. The developed countries were reluctant to fulfil their obligations in the area of emissions of ozone-depleting substances or to take action with respect to the impact of their industrialization on the climate.

19. The partnership for sustainable development had also been based on the premise that additional resources would be transferred to developing countries to meet their development requirements. However, official development assistance levels had declined continuously in 1993 and 1994, the tenth replenishment of the International Development Association (IDA) was incomplete and there were uncertainties regarding the eleventh replenishment of IDA. The resources of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) were also declining.

20. Similarly, the Global Environment Facility had failed to live up to expectations. Initially replenished at only $2 billion, it also suffered from its complex and time-consuming project approval procedures. The Global Environment Facility should emphasize action and adopt an efficient operational strategy because its credibility as a source of funding was at stake.

21. Another cause of concern was the lack of progress on the question of transfer of environmentally sound technologies which should be made available to developing countries on concessional and preferential terms. In that regard, it was unfortunate that the Ad Hoc Working Group of the Commission on Sustainable Development on Technology Transfer had been dissolved. More should also be done, in the context of the Convention on Biological Diversity, to protect the rights of traditional holders of knowledge.

22. It was necessary to address those lacunae and to carry out an effective review of the situation in 1997. His delegation supported the convening of a special session of the General Assembly. Preparatory work on a document outlining a critical evaluation of the progress achieved and a programme of work for the next five years should be carried out by the Commission on Sustainable Development.

23. Although the international community as a whole was alive to environmental issues, the rich and poor countries did not always have the same concerns. In order to respond to the concerns of poor countries, the human dimension of environmental issues must be recognized.

24. Mr. STEER (World Bank) said that the imperative of implementing the decisions and recommendations of the Rio Conference remained as urgent as ever because the environment was deteriorating in many parts of the world. Nevertheless, there were some signs of hope: the need to ensure sustainable development was becoming a staple theme of policy-making and some 100 nations were now incorporating environmental concerns into their programmes and investments. Moreover, the current environmental policies of the industrialized countries were not as rigid as the traditional policies used to be. The new approach was pro-people and pro-development and focused on communities and families. The World Bank had recently completed a review of the new environmentalism whose hallmarks were seeking win-win options and promoting cost-effectiveness, easing administrative regulations, using market instruments, setting realistic standards, working with the private sector and building constituencies for change. Those new principles were already being replicated in countries around the world.

25. The World Bank was currently supporting Member States in implementing that new environmentalism. Sixty-five countries had already received financial support for the execution of targeted environmental programmes. Such programmes fell into three categories: programmes to strengthen national and local environmental protection institutions, programmes to prevent the pollution associated with urbanization and programmes to protect the rural environment (river basin management, soil conservation, forest protection). Other countries had also requested assistance. The World Bank's assistance packages included concessional and market-based loans, guarantees for private sector loans and analytical and advisory services.

26. Implementing the new environmentalism required effective partnerships among international organizations. It was encouraging to note that such partnerships already existed, particularly the three-way partnership of UNEP, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank for the management of the Global Environment Facility. In that connection, mention could also be made of the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research and the new Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest, which was a $230 million grant programme to promote micro-enterprise credit programmes. Moreover, UNDP and the World Bank were merging efforts on water policy issues and were inviting other agencies to join them to form a global water partnership. The Bank had also recently signed an agreement with the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, the Earth Council and other intergovernmental organizations. The Bank was also in active consultation with the secretariats

of the major conventions relating to the follow-up to the Rio Conference: the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Framework Convention on the Conservation of Biological Diversity and the Convention on Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa. It had offered to the parties to each of those conventions its wholehearted support as they sought to move into the implementation phase.

27. However, one key partnership, IDA, was currently under great threat. For more than 30 years, that partnership had been an effective instrument for providing assistance to the poorest countries in the areas of health, nutrition and education. The tenth replenishment of IDA, now entering its final year, might find itself without resources because of the recent decision by the United States Government to reduce its contribution. There was a danger that other donors might follow suit; the situation was therefore extremely serious and the international community's support was urgently required in that matter.

28. The implementation of Agenda 21 was a top priority for the World Bank. In the three years following the Rio Conference, it had granted assistance worth $67 billion to developing countries in that area.

29. Mr. POERNOMO (Indonesia) said that during the three years that had elapsed since the euphoric adoption of Agenda 21, many Governments, particularly those of developing countries, had demonstrated their willingness to integrate environmental aspects into their development programmes. Similar encouraging efforts had also been undertaken at the regional and international levels including the formulation of conventions and other instruments to promote sustainable development and the establishment of the Commission on Sustainable Development which was assigned the function of monitoring the implementation of Agenda 21. The Commission's activities had had a profound effect on the work of the United Nations system.

30. Unfortunately, actual results had fallen far short of expectations. The developed countries had not fulfilled their commitment to ensure an adequate flow of financial resources and the transfer of environmentally sound technology which were crucial for the developing countries to implement Agenda 21.

31. For that reason, his delegation looked forward to the special session of the General Assembly in 1997 which would be devoted to the overall review and appraisal of Agenda 21. The session should be used to help identify the main obstacles to the implementation of the Rio commitments at the local, national and international levels, and produce a commitment to eliminate them prematurely through the allocation of financial resources and the transfer of environmentally sound technology to developing countries. Particular attention should be given to the question of sustainable consumption and production patterns.

32. As for the institutional framework for follow-up, while the Commission on Sustainable Development had done a great deal to make the international community more aware of the importance of sustainable development, the priorities for its future activities should be set according to its mandate,

taking full account of the work of other United Nations bodies so as to improve coordination.

33. Greater participation by major social or sectoral groups in the work of the Commission might prove beneficial, particularly during the preparatory process for the special session. However, any arrangements that were made in that regard should not lead to a modification of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly.

34. While his delegation supported the Secretary-General's proposal that the Commission on Sustainable Development should undertake the preparatory work for the special session, it felt that the limited membership of that body could pose an obstacle to the equal participation of all Member States in the preparations. One possibility therefore would be to hold a preparatory meeting of the General Assembly, just before the special session, to review the report of the Commission on Sustainable Development on the preparations for the special session, with the report then to be submitted to the session itself.

35. Mr. WERTHEIN (Director of the UNESCO offices in New York and Washington) said that in the short and medium term, UNESCO would remain committed to following an interdisciplinary approach towards environmental matters, with a view to producing a synergy between the natural, social and human sciences, which would contribute to the preservation of the environment and the more harmonious coexistence of man with nature.

36. UNESCO would follow the same approach when choosing mechanisms for the implementation of Agenda 21, whether by participating in intergovernmental and international cooperation programmes on environmental and social scientific matters, such as the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme and the Programme on Management of Social Transformations (MOST), or promoting socially and environmentally sustainable development through key activities such as education, training, research and information.

37. UNESCO had participated fully in the 1995 session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, contributing to the reports of the Secretary-General on chapters 3, 4, 5, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16 and 34 of Agenda 21.

38. In the field of education, UNESCO had led a number of programmes in line with chapters 36 and 25 of Agenda 21, and it was seeking to promote the development of interdisciplinary sciences for sustainable development, and to improve communication between scientists and decision makers. As stated in the Secretary-General's report (A/50/422), UNESCO played a major role in global observation to assess the health of oceans, marine and coastal resources, and was working to involve developing countries in research and observation programmes on the hydrological cycle.

39. With regard to the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, UNESCO was participating in research and in situ conservation activities, and in the work of the interim secretariat, in line with the Nairobi Final Act, and had organized the International Conference on Biosphere Reserves held in March 1995, which had led to the Seville Strategy.

40. In monitoring global environmental problems, UNESCO was participating fully in the United Nations system-wide Earthwatch Programme, under the direction of UNEP, and continued to promote education and information activities for various relevant groups, particularly decision makers and planners.

41. With regard to the Convention to Combat Desertification, UNESCO supported countries affected by desertification and was managing a number of programmes dealing with the scientific, technical and educational aspects of the Convention. In preparation for the first session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention, UNESCO would stress the implementation of urgent measures for Africa, and would continue to cooperate with the Sudano-Sahelian countries, strengthening their scientific and technical capacities in order to continue the fight against desertification and drought.

42. Mr. AYEWAH (Nigeria) said that desertification affected a sixth of the world's population and 70 per cent of the drylands, producing endemic poverty as its main result; that was further accentuated by the degradation of range lands and a decline in soil fertility.

43. The priority in combating desertification should therefore be the immediate adoption of measures to protect lands which were not yet degraded, particularly since there were a number of areas of the world where a majority of the population depended on agricultural activity for both sustenance and employment, and suffered terribly when harvests were poor as a result of soil infertility and insufficient rainfall.

44. One of the most significant accomplishments of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee was to have brought the problem of drylands to the attention of the international community. Since the elaboration of the Convention to Combat Desertification, a number of mechanisms had been put in place to provide a framework for action at the regional and subregional levels in the most severely affected countries.

45. As the situation in Africa was particularly worrying, donor countries should support the work being done there to implement the resolution of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee concerning urgent action for Africa.

46. Each Government clearly had a duty to combat desertification. However, if the international community was truly determined to abide by the commitments made at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, specifically, in the context of the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, it should take urgent steps to implement resolution 48/175 which called on donor countries to give financial support to the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO) since, as the Secretary-General had pointed out in his report (A/50/347), multilateral financing had been on the decline since the adoption of Agenda 21.

47. In conclusion, Nigeria attached great importance to the implementation of the Convention to Combat Desertification and hoped that the necessary financial and technical resources would be allocated for that purpose, pending the first session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention.

The meeting rose at 11.45 a.m.